

# Toddlers and Challenging Behavior: Why They Do It and How to Respond

## Toddlers and Challenging Behavior: Why They Do It and How to Respond

The year between age 2 and age 3 is an exciting one. Toddlers are realizing that they are separate individuals from their parents and caregivers. This means that they are driven to assert themselves, to communicate their likes and dislikes, and to act independently (as much as they can!). Toddlers are also developing the language skills that help them express their ideas, wants, and needs.

At the same time, toddlers do not understand logic and still have a hard time with waiting and self-control. In a nutshell: Two-year-olds want what they want when they want it. This is why you may be hearing things like “no” and “me do it” and “no diaper change!” more than ever before.

### Learning to Handle Strong Feelings

As a parent, your job is to help your young toddler navigate the tide of strong emotions she is experiencing this year. This is no small task, since the emotional lives of 2-year-olds are complex. This year they are beginning to experience feelings like pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment for the first time.

Older toddlers are a lot like teenagers. Their feelings may swing wildly from moment to moment. They may be joyful when getting a popsicle and then despair when it drips on their hands. So toddlers really need your loving guidance to figure out how to cope with their emotions. Your child is struggling with this when:

- He has a meltdown when you can't understand his words
- She says no when she means yes (you are offering her a favorite treat)
- He gets so angry that he might throw a toy
- She cannot settle for a substitute—if the purple pajamas are in the wash, she is inconsolable (even though you have offered the pink ones, the polka dot ones, the ones with the cupcake patch on the front, etc.)
- He acts out when frustrated—will give up or get angry when he can't figure out how to make the jack-in-the-box work

Your child is learning to manage strong feelings when he:

- Uses words or actions to get your attention or ask for help
- Talks to himself in a reassuring way when he is frustrated or frightened. For example, he might say to himself, *Daddy will come back*, after you drop him off at child care. Or, *I can build this again after his block tower collapses*

- Re-enacts a stressful event, like a doctor's visit
- Uses words like *I'm mad* rather than throwing or hitting
- Tells you the rules or shows that she feels badly about breaking rules. For example, your child might say no to herself as she does something off-limits, like opening the fridge. Or he might tell you at the park, *Don't walk in front of the swings*.

### **Practicing Self-Control**

When you see challenging behavior, it usually means that your child can't figure out how to express her feelings in an acceptable way or doesn't know how to get a need met. What helps your child learn is when your response shows her a different, more constructive way to handle these feelings.

Learning to cope with strong feelings usually happens naturally as children develop better language skills in their third year and have more experience with peers, handling disappointment, and following rules. While children won't completely master self-control until they are school-age (and practice it all their lives!), here are some ideas for helping your toddler begin to learn this important skill:

- **Talk about feelings and how to cope.** Read books and notice aloud how the characters are feeling: *The dog is really happy that he got a bone*. And share your own feelings: *I just spilled the baby's milk. I feel really frustrated! Will you help me wipe it up? Wow, it feels so good to have your help*. When your child can label how he is feeling, it helps him gain control over his emotions and communicate them to others.

Once your child has named his feelings, you can suggest what he might do to feel better or solve the problem. This helps him learn what to do in the future when he faces a similar challenge. For example, if he is sad because his grandparents just left after a two-week visit, you can suggest looking at photos of them or drawing them a picture.

- **Offer your child ideas for how to manage strong emotions.** Young children need guidance when it comes to figuring out how to deal with big feelings like anger, sadness, and frustration. So when your child is really angry, validate what he is experiencing: *You are really angry right now because I said no more television*.

Then suggest that he jump up and down, hit the sofa cushions, rip paper, cuddle up in a cozy area for alone time, paint an angry picture or some other strategy that you feel is appropriate. What's important is to teach your child that there are many ways to express his feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways.

- **Empathize with your child.** It's okay to let her know that you understand the choices she is being offered are not the ones she wants: *We have to leave now to go to Ms. Kelly's house. I know you want to stay home with daddy. You miss me and I miss you during the day. But staying home is not a choice today. Daddy has to go to work. But when we get home, we will finish the puzzle we started and have a yummy dinner. Do you want to get into the car seat yourself or do you want me to put you in?*

- **Give your child a visual aid to make waiting easier.** If your child has to wait until his oatmeal has cooled down, show him the steam rising from the bowl. Tell him that when the steam goes away, you can test the oatmeal on a spoon to see if it is cool enough. If you need to help your child brush her teeth for 2 minutes each day, use an egg timer so she can watch the countdown. Need 10 minutes to fold some clothes? Set a kitchen timer so that your child can keep track.

Timers are also great tools for helping children learn to share. Give them each a few minutes—using the timer—to play with a toy they both want, like the shiny new tricycle parked out back. It's also helpful to state the obvious: It's hard to wait sometimes, isn't it?

- **Let your child make choices appropriate to her age**—about what to wear (perhaps offer 2 choices) and what to eat (within reason), what to play, who to play with. This gives her a feeling of control and supports her growing confidence and sense of competency (the belief that “I can do it”).

Offering choices also helps head off the “Not That One” game where you keep offering your child different things and he keeps saying “Not that one, the other one!” Instead, try giving your child 3 choices and let him pick: *You can have an apple, a string cheese, or a bagel for snack. What sounds good to you?*

- **Look for ways to help your child “practice” self-control.** There are many daily moments when you can teach your child this skill. For example, games that require turn-taking are great for practicing how to wait and share. Rolling a ball back and forth is an example. This game gives children the chance to wait and control their impulse to grab the ball. You can also take turns hitting a soft foam ball off a tee.

Or try acting out a story. Pretend play offers many chances to wait, take turns, and negotiate as children decide how the story will unfold. Another idea is playing “sharing music” where each of you chooses an instrument to play and set an egg-timer for 1 minute. When the timer goes off, switch instruments and set the timer again.

**Q: What should I do when my 2 1/2-year-old won't share her toys with our 8-month-old?**

**A:** Sibling rivalry usually heats up once the younger child is crawling and getting into the older one's stuff. I think about my own son's shocked (and furious) face the first time his 6-month-old sister reached out and swatted his carefully-constructed block tower.

Rather than dreading these moments of conflict between your children, consider them opportunities to help them learn critical skills—in this case, conflict resolution. The first step is prevention. While it is important for both of your children to learn to share, it is reasonable that they have some toys they don't have to let the other play with. This allows you to help them set some boundaries, which gives them a sense of control. You can help your toddler choose a few toys that are special to her that she can play with on her own (such as in her room or when her brother is sleeping.)

When a conflict happens, validate how your daughter is feeling: *You get so mad when your brother wants to play with your toys. It's hard to share.* Then, help her empathize with her brother: *He just wants to explore and play with you. He doesn't mean to make you mad.* Feeling understood and being able to put themselves in other's shoes helps children move on to the next step—finding solutions.

Brainstorm with your older child ways to work it out with her younger sibling. The more she is involved in solving the problem, the more likely the solution is to work. For example, when your son reaches out and grabs the ball your daughter is bouncing, you can suggest that you and your daughter find another ball for him to play with. You can also help her think about ways her brother can participate. You might offer to read stories to your son while she builds her block tower. Then give him the job of being in charge of knocking it down, with your daughter's permission, of course. **Most importantly, give the older child appropriate words of assertiveness such as "I am playing with this ball now, but I will let you know when you can have a turn."** Remember that the concept of ownership is a foundational precursor to the concept of sharing. Children must have a strong sense that they have the power to own something before they will be ready to move on to the art of sharing.

Also keep in mind that it is also important for your daughter to have some time to play on her own without worrying that her brother will "mess things up."

Finally, look for ways your children can have fun together. You can give your baby maracas to shake while your daughter plays the xylophone. In the car, the two of them can play peek-a-boo or make funny faces at each other. It's these loving, daily moments (including the very normal conflicts that happen and are resolved) that add up to a lifelong friendship.

**Q: Sometimes, when I try to explain to my 35-month-old the reason why we have certain rules (like no touching the stereo, or why we can't go to the park right now), she seems to understand and accept it. Other times, she just throws a tantrum. What should I expect from her regarding understanding limits?**

**A:** Between approximately 2 1/2 and 3, children begin to understand the logical connection between ideas—the "why" of things—which is the reason they start to ask "Why?" about almost everything! It is a major milestone in their overall development and in their understanding of how the world works.

However, this stage can also be very confusing and exasperating for parents. The inconsistency you've described in your daughter's behavior is a perfect example. It's due to the fact that a 35-month-old's grasp of logic is still pretty shaky. One minute they seem very reasonable and wise and the next act totally irrational. This is coupled with the fact that children this age are not in full control of their strong emotions that can interfere with, and often trump, their ability to act as rational beings.

So when you tell your daughter she can't stay up "super late" because she needs to have lots of rest for her friend's birthday party in the morning, she may go right along with it. But when you tell her she can't go to the playground today because it's raining, she might completely lose it. You're left feeling confused—why is one explanation harder to understand than the other? The answer is: It's not. It's just how an almost 3-year-old processes the world.

At this point it is best to explain the rule matter-of-factly and to be consistent in the follow-through. If your child throws a tantrum, validate her unhappiness/anger/frustration but don't give in, as this will just make the tantrum a successful tool for her. It will also confuse her about what the rules really are.

When your actions match your words, she will learn the rules much more quickly.

These interactions help set the stage for the negotiations she will try to engage you in from here forward. Just wait for the déjà vu you'll feel in 12 years when you try to explain curfews. Until then, bear with your passionate 3-year-old, and rest assured that understanding logical connections and family rules is a skill that gradually unfolds over the next few years.

Source: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)